

The American Way?

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Sunday morning at the RDU Airport Observation deck, as my kids climbed the giant sandbox spider, I talked with a small business owner from Raleigh, a self-proclaimed conservative Republican and Marine Corps retiree, who was waiting with his young son for his wife's plane to take off. We discussed non-independent consultants, including himself and my husband, who are expected to bill 40 hours a week to clients, in addition to the 15-20 non-billable hours required just to stay afloat. That means working from 9 to 7 with no breaks, ~ 6 days a week, leaving ~1 day/week for personal development, time with families, and non-work commitments. How can people maintain this lifestyle and their sanity? Increased productivity -- the American Way. No wonder so many Americans are on anti-anxiety medication.

We lamented the hypocrisy and double standards that are accepted, in fact expected, in our society. You tell your kid that lying is wrong, but you're a fool if you don't exaggerate your current salary on your job applications. And even the best meaning, overworked consultants aren't able to stay on the fast track indefinitely, so they exaggerate their hours just to stay in the game. The same goes for tax-deductible donations, cash tips, repairs and replacements for rental properties, etc. In fact, research at the Toronto University's Institute of Child Study concluded that lying is proof of intelligence. How do we reconcile this with our kids?

Practicing and non-practicing Christians, alike, tell their kids to consider "What would Jesus do" when facing a challenging moral decision. But when it comes to welfare, healthcare, and taxes, we want to be sure that we get our fair share -- or if we're lucky, more than we deserve. As for same-sex marriages and faiths which extremists are trying to hi-jack, many of us don't want anything to do with 'those people.' Doesn't sound like the Jesus that my decidedly-more-religious-Sunday-morning-companion and I were raised to know.

We shook our heads at the massive monetary influences on (particularly federal) elected officials' decisions: campaign contributions, lobbying -- when you stop being a legislator, you should have to stop using their gym, we decided. Legislative salaries and benefits, alone, greatly influence legislators' decisions. Who wouldn't want to maintain a legislative career with a base salary of \$174,000/year, a substantial retirement pension, and a lifetime or retirement (from age 55 to 65) luxury health insurance plan? Furthermore, in what other industry do employees decide their own salaries and benefits? Talk about a conflict of interest.

During the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin considered proposing no pay for elected government officials. From 1789 to 1855, congressional members received \$6.00/day *while in session*, except from December 1815 to March 1817, when they received \$1,500/year. The lack of monetary compensation caused second president John Adams, who was renowned for his frugality, constant worry over his family's finances and maintaining the appearance expected of a respected ambassador living and negotiating with France during the Revolutionary War. Likewise, third president Thomas Jefferson was 'in a constant state of emotional distress over his financial situation' (*In Defense of Thomas Jefferson*, William Hyland, 2009). Given the lucrative careers of present-day federal legislators, the Founding Fathers must be rolling over in their graves.

Meanwhile, working Americans actually pay to serve on a jury, a legal obligation and civic duty that Thomas Jefferson considered “the only anchor yet imagined by man by which a government can be held to the principles of its constitution” (to Thomas Paine, 1789). Federal jurors are paid just \$40 a day, \$50 after serving 30 days (federal government employees are paid their regular salary). The state of North Carolina pays \$12 for day 1, \$20 for days 2-5; and \$40 for every day thereafter. Employers are not required to pay a person’s salary while (s)he serves jury duty, so that person has to take unpaid leave or use vacation/personal days. Stay-at-home parents must find caregivers for their children (costing ~\$10/hour for one child). It’s no surprise that most working citizens and/or homemakers try to avoid jury-duty, creating a void in citizen representation and influence in government through case law and individual trials. “The very backbone of America, the working citizen, is removed from the cycle of the courts” (The Daily Borometer, July 08).

We could have talked all day about our shared grievances, but we had to break it up when our increasingly bored kids started throwing things at one another. Anyone who remotely knows me would hardly consider me a conservative Republican. But if this stranger and I can so readily agree on so many problems, surely there is some hope that our country can agree on some solutions.